



PRESS RELEASE

House National Security Committee

Floyd D. Spence, Chairman

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OPENING STATEMENT OF FLOYD D. SPENCE

HEARING ON THE REPORT OF THE COMMISSION ON THE BALLISTIC MISSILE THREAT TO THE UNITED STATES

July 16, 1998

After six months of intensive effort, the Commission on the Ballistic Missile Threat to the United States yesterday submitted its very sobering report to Congress. In light of the seriousness of this issue, I wanted to hold this hearing despite being in the middle of conference with the Senate to allow the commissioners to present their conclusions to the committee, the Congress, and the American people. Having sat in on your classified briefing yesterday, I would hope some or all of you could come back, perhaps in September, to brief the committee in a classified setting.

I believe it is safe to say that the conclusions reached by the commission – conclusions that are unanimous and bipartisan – indicate that the intelligence community, and therefore policy-makers, may be seriously underestimating and miscalculating the threat to all Americans posed by ballistic missiles.

It has been a long uphill struggle to get to this point where an independent commission of experts is able to report to us with such authority. In November 1995, the Administration produced a controversial National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) that concluded the long-range ballistic missile threat to North America was 15 years away. Although the NIE contained fundamental analytical flaws – not the least of which was its failure to consider Alaska and Hawaii as part of the United States – its key conclusions were declassified and released publicly in the midst of a volatile debate between the House, Senate and White House over national missile defense policy. The President ultimately vetoed the defense authorization bill in December 1995 based on his opposition to a provision which called for deployment of a national missile defense. In so doing, the President cited the NIE's assertion that Americans were safe from the threat of long-range ballistic missile attack for more than a decade.

For months following the veto, I tried unsuccessfully to have the General Accounting Office granted access to the intelligence community in an effort to independently verify the methodology and conclusions of the controversial NIE. The Administration refused to grant GAO the necessary access, so the commission reporting to us today was created in legislation I authored in the fiscal year 1997 defense authorization bill.

Consistent with its mandate, the commission assessed the ballistic missile threat. The report does not recommend any particular solution. As the Speaker indicated in his remarks yesterday, this report represents the most serious national security warning the American public has received since the end of the Cold War. We all have our personal views on how best to address this threat, but I hope my colleagues will stay focused on what the commission has reported on – that is the problem, and not proposed solutions.

The conclusions reached by the commission suggest that the ballistic missile threat to the United States is a serious one today... and is growing. The threat is certainly not 15 years away. The report contains a particularly disturbing conclusion that ballistic missile threats will likely manifest themselves sooner than we think, leaving little time or ability for the nation to respond. In the world of national security, when a worst-case threat assessment becomes a most likely scenario, taking a business-as-usual approach to policy-making is indefensible.

I am also struck by the commission's finding that the ballistic missile threat to the United States is "broader, more mature and evolving more rapidly than has been reported in estimates and reports by the intelligence community." Furthermore, as a long-time critic of this, and previous, Administrations' export control policies, I am not surprised by the commission's finding that the progressive relaxation of U.S. export control policies has made the United States "a major, albeit unintentional, contributor" to the proliferation problem.

I believe the commission members have performed an invaluable service by speaking forcefully and with one voice about the seriousness of the ballistic missile threats we all face. I continue to believe that the American people have been lulled into a false sense of security since the end of the Cold War, and hope that the commission's report will serve as a wake-up call for all Americans. The world is a dangerous place and America, the world's only superpower, is not adequately prepared.

When I was working on the commission's charter back in 1996, my efforts were repeatedly resisted by senior Administration officials who argued that taking a "Team B" approach to the issue of the ballistic missile threat was not needed and would prove unproductive. I am glad I did not listen, because once again, competitive intelligence assessments have proven to be essential to the identification of problems.

Although the commission's work is formally concluded, I hope this committee will have an opportunity to benefit in the future from your evaluation of how the intelligence community reacts and adjusts to your findings. To this end, the committee has requested in this year's defense authorization bill that the CIA extend your clearances through the end of next year so that you will have access to up-to-date information in the event that Congress calls upon you to provide updated assessments of the conclusions reached in your report.